

“NO PAIN...NO GAIN”

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Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

I really detest exercising. There is nothing fun about it for me. While I understand that it is beneficial – and, yes, I know that for some it's a social thing – I just never have appreciated taking time out of my day working out. But, as one who has a family history of coronary disease and many wonderful reasons to stay alive and healthy, I do recognize the importance.

The one exercise I loathe the least is riding my bike. However, as my wife has observed on more than one occasion, riding my bike leisurely without breaking a sweat...well, it's not much exercise. As I dutifully pick up the pace, pushing myself to get the heart rate up, my legs begin to hurt. That's when I hear an old health club commercial replay in my head, with its slogan, “No Pain...No Gain.”

During the Olympics or any high-profile endurance event, you'll hear athletes wax eloquent about the physiological reasons behind that statement: “No pain...no gain.” They talk about lactic acid build-up in the muscles. The acid amount grows with exercise and leads to fatigue and soreness. But, through repeated exercise, the muscle actually grows even stronger.¹

No Pain...No Gain. That phrase was made popular in 1982, when Jane Fonda released her workout videos. While tempted to give Rabbi Fonda sole credit for that memorable saying, one of the earliest iterations of it appears in the second century, in a Jewish collection of aphorisms called, “Pirkei Avot,” Ethics of the Ancestors. There, it is written, “According to the pain, is the gain.”²

The rabbinic author was not commenting on the latest first century cross-training innovation. Rather, he was offering a spiritual lesson: with no pain in doing what God asks of us, there is no spiritual gain and growth.

I had a congregant once who was bright and incredibly articulate. But he had one peculiarity. He refused to read a newspaper or watch television news because he did not wish to be depressed. And another congregant explained to me that she never bothers with recycling because the problem is too immense for her to confront or resolve on her own. How many of us have watched a teenage child or grandchild withdraw from social situations out a fear of rejection? These situations, with their host of permutations and combinations, distill down into one simple truth: we are afraid of the pains of life and we do what we can to escape them. Like exercising, it hurts. And we seek to avoid such pain.

Yet, in avoidance there is judgment. That is one of the primal messages of Rosh Hashanah. As we are reminded by our liturgy, the decree for avoiding pain is sometimes harsher than any other. When a woman resigns herself to being abused by her spouse because she fears being on her own; when a classmate copies off a child's test paper and the child remains silent because he wants his peers to like him – when we act in such ways, we are lowering our expectations of life in order to avoid the pain of life. In so doing, we inflict great harm on ourselves. We forfeit that part of us created “b'tzelem elohim,” in the image of God – that part of us with the ability to grow into more than we are now.

Admittedly, when we commit such acts of avoidance, we are spared much anguish and frustration, but at what cost? As Rabbi Harold Kushner warns: "Putting on the armor keeps us from being hurt, but it also keeps us from growing."³ And yet we have to grow. That is an essential part of what it means to be alive.

Any woman who has had a baby knows how much pain is involved in giving birth to a new life. A time comes when the soul within her has grown beyond her. It must emerge and struggle on its own. And that moment is fraught with pain. Again quoting Rabbi Kushner, "In a sense, it is almost as painful to give birth to a new self during our lives, to outgrow the person we used to be, shed the skin which protected us so well, and take on the risk of a new identity. Being an adolescent was a painful experience for many of us, because we were giving birth to a new self, a new sense of who we were. And changing our habits later in life can be an equally painful, (yet) equally necessary ordeal⁴...To be fully and authentically human, we have to be prepared to take off the armor we usually go around wearing to keep the world from hurting us. We have to be prepared to accept pain, or else we will never dare to hope or love."⁵ That same sentiment can be found by inverting a line from an old Simon and Garfunkel song: "If I had never cried, I never would have loved."

This is analogous to the way a tree grows...not up, but down. As trees grow, they are subjected to wind that actually slightly damages their roots as they are rocked and swayed by high winds, but from that damage comes a natural healing process that results in the roots becoming denser and deeper. They become stronger from adversity.⁶ The same is true for us. It is often the struggles that make us strong.

"No Pain...No Gain." If we have the capacity to persevere, to grapple with our pain and tension, a time does come when, having exercised our emotional muscles

and strengthened our souls with the weights of life, we begin to see results, when the hours of struggle are vindicated.

A woman came to a colleague, distressed over problems in her marriage. When conflict arose between her and her husband, she disengaged herself emotionally and physically. She found herself unable to approach her husband to work through issues because the process caused her great pain. My colleague suggested that maybe the pain was necessary, for it would only be by acknowledging and wrestling with their problems that the relationship could ever grow healthier. By working together through the anger and disappointment, not only would each partner grow stronger, but their relationship could prove more nurturing and supportive than ever before.

This is illustrated in a story of a Renaissance artist who made the world's most prized vases. A foreign visiting apprentice came to observe his method. After laboring for many weeks with one piece of clay - firing it, painting it, baking it - he placed it upon a pedestal for inspection. The apprentice sat in awe at this thing of unspeakable beauty. But it appeared that the artist was not yet finished. In a shocking and dramatic moment, the artist lifted the vase above his head and dashed it against the floor, breaking it into a thousand shards. And then, quietly, he reconnected the pieces by painting them with a paint of pure gold. Each crack reflected invaluable gold. In the end, this magnificent, but imperfect, vase became the most valued piece in the collection.⁷ Sometimes, it is in the brokenness that the growth occurs. It is in the cracks that we discover the gold.

A very personal reflection may help clarify. A few years ago, we put forth a post-High Holiday survey. The goal was to determine if we were meeting the congregation's needs during this important season. To foster communication about all aspects of the congregation's life, we added a final

question: “Is there anything else you would like Rabbi Nemitoff to know.” We were overwhelmed with comments...some 400 in all – the vast majority were positive and we received helpful suggestions and useful criticisms. However, there were also a dozen scathing remarks, not about the congregation, but about me, attacking my integrity and my value as a human being. The comments were personal and seemingly mean-spirited and intentionally cruel.

My reaction? Anger, sadness, failure. Why would folks say these things about me? Was I that bad a rabbi? How could I be such a failure after giving heart, soul, and body to the congregation?

In speaking with one of my own rabbis, I heard a message: No pain...no gain. Only by being willing to embrace the painful, hurtful comments could I ever learn how I might grow so that folks I encounter would feel embraced, not distanced. Over the next several months, I sat with those comments on my desk, staring at me, challenging me. I worked hard to strip away my defenses, hear the common messages, and try to change what caused folks to react so negatively. It would have been easy to dismiss the writers of these comments as cranks or anonymous cowards, given the overwhelming compliments received. But, in the end, working through the pain was the gain. From that experience – as dark and difficult as it was – I tried to learn how to be a better rabbi, a better friend, a better person...not perfect, just a little bit better. In my own brokenness, I found the gold..and was able – in some small way – to bring back the pieces together.

This is what God asks of us: to heal the shards of our own lives, to recognize that this process includes disappointment, regret, rejection, or sorrow. We take

comfort, though. For pain and brokenness do not last forever, nor are they necessarily unbearable. And, because of the pain – of the hard work it represents – it leads to greater strength and life to those touched by it.

Remember the movie, “The Pursuit of Happyness,” starring Will Smith? It was the story of Chris Gardner, a down-and-out salesman, who has everything stacked against him – his wife leaves him, he has to care for his son alone, he faces trouble with the IRS, and he and his son becomes homeless. Nonetheless, he strives to overcome each adversity, to be who he knows he can be. One of the movie’s enduring lessons is that when faced with hardships and challenges – when life is filled with pain – we can use that pain and brokenness to help us grow and be stronger. Then, we can emerge, on the other side, whole.

My friends, we can endure much more pain than we think we can. If we can learn not to be too afraid of it; are able to grit our teeth and let it hurt; not to deny it nor be overwhelmed by it, it will fade. One day, or the next, the pain will be gone and we will be stronger, changed in subtle yet significant ways. We will have accomplished that of which only humans are capable: to grow into being “b’tzelem Elohim,” living in God’s image.

As we welcome a new year this evening, a year filled with promise and possibility, we pray: May the pains we endure mark our work as humans. May they remind us of our potential for growth and strength. In our own brokenness, may we discover the gold that helps mend the shards of our lives...reforming them into something stronger and even more awe-filled...souls that are shaleim – whole; souls that experience shalom – peace. Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God’s—and our—will. Amen.

¹ Pastor Thomas Fox, <http://www.pinewoodlutheran.com/sermons/2004-archive/2004-08-29a.html>

² Pirkei Avot 5:26, “According to the effort, is the reward.”

³ Harold S. Kusher, “When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters,” Simon and Schuster, New York, 2002, p. 93

⁴ Ibid., p. 93

⁵ Ibid., p. 166

⁶ Wayne Blank, <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2003/20030919.htm>

⁷ Lutheran Church of the Redeemer Sermon, http://www.redeemercolumbusga.org/index.php?p=1_14&nid=45